



April 19, 2023

Mr. Mike Hudson  
American Printing House for the Blind  
Hall of Fame  
1839 Frankfort Avenue  
Louisville, KY 40206

Re: Nomination of Verna Hart, EdD, for the Hall of Fame

Dear Mr. Hudson,

Kay Ferrell and Christine Kennedy together nominate Dr. Verna Hart for the Hall of Fame for Leaders and Legends of the Blindness Field. We were her doctoral students in the first part of the 1980s and make this nomination because of her groundbreaking work in deafblindness, multiple disabilities, severe disabilities, and early intervention. We know that a co-authored nomination letter is somewhat unusual, but we submit this as one nomination because together we worked with and learned from Dr. Hart's work at the same time and in the same place. It was difficult to separate this nomination from our shared experience.

And what an experience it was! As doctoral students, Dr. Hart taught our courses and gave us a role in her inservice and professional development activities. Because of how she prepared us, we taught courses for her. Our doctoral studies were analogous to clerking for a judge or Supreme Court Justice—from the first semester, she made sure that we were part of her academic activities: She gave us tasks, we drafted documents, we helped with workshops, we went to conferences (whether or not we presented). In fact, Kay's first annual meeting of the American Printing House for the Blind, in 1979 (her second month of doctoral study), occurred because Dr. Hart told her she *must* attend. At that meeting, Kay met Natalie Barraga, Carson Nolan, June Morris, Fred Sinclair, and many other legendary figures. Dr. Hart pointed out how the room quieted when Dr. Barraga or Mr. Sinclair spoke, and she told Kay whom else to watch and listen to. It was a heady experience, leading to Kay's 40 years of APH annual meetings, but it was part of the training that Dr. Hart insisted upon. Dr. Hart treated us as colleagues, and she expected us to be ready to do what she did.

We make this nomination, however, not because of our personal experiences, but because of what she has meant to the field of visual impairment and blindness. Verna Hart was committed to several important areas in the work she did. These areas included building bridges that emphasized the importance of recognizing the work that was needed to address the whole child; teacher preparation to ensure that personnel were equipped to teach every child with whatever disabilities they presented; and transdisciplinary collaboration, which laid the groundwork for family-centered principles and

practices in early intervention. In the following pages of this nomination, we will highlight the activities of her career that demonstrate the depth of her commitment.

**Bridges To and From Visual Impairment.** Dr. Hart knew back in the 1950s that the categorical approach to special education did not meet the needs of children with complex needs, and she proceeded to become licensed/certified in eight areas of special education. She and her husband were parents of a child with complex needs and, as she told the Committee on Education and Labor of the United States House of Representatives (1986), she pursued a career in special education not of her own choosing: “I had not planned on teaching following the birth of my children, but my second child was born handicapped, and the expense of maintaining that child not only put me back in the workforce, but led me to take both full and part-time jobs” (Hart, 1986, p. 144). Partly because she had to, she pursued doctoral studies, and she investigated the competencies in each of the disability categories to determine where there were overlaps and where more information was needed in order to serve children with multiple disabilities appropriately. When we think what she went through to conduct this research—taking courses in every area of disability over a ten-year period—other dissertations pale in comparison. Her study discovered that teachers of the blind and teachers of the partially seeing, two different kinds of teachers in those days, were least prepared to work with children with additional disabilities. She knew that a 10-year period of teacher preparation in multiple disabilities was untenable, and she was determined to bring the necessary skills to teachers throughout her academic career.

Her first publication after taking a position at George Peabody College for Teachers (now Vanderbilt University) was in the *New Outlook for the Blind* (now the *Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness*) (1969), her first *bridge* to visual impairment. She wrote:

We in teacher preparation must stop training teachers only for certain categorical handicaps. We must accept our share of the responsibility for perpetuating the erroneous idea that only nice, bright, blind children should be the responsibility of teachers for the blind. We must also accept the responsibility for the patchwork-quilt design of teacher preparation for multiply handicapped children. . . . The blind child who is functioning on a retarded level is not a blind child plus a retarded child. The two handicaps do not function as addenda but as multipliers. . . . We can no longer think of separate categories but of cumulative problems. (Hart, 1969, p. 318)

This seems prescient now. The concept of exponential rather than additive may not have originated with Dr. Hart, but it’s been repeated over and over again in many different contexts by many different authors. It certainly helped to change the field. Now we not only acknowledge our responsibility to prepare teachers for the students they will meet in their practice, but we have seen our practice grow to the point where 40 to 60 percent of the children we serve have visual and additional disabilities. That we are prepared to do so is due in large part to the early work of Verna Hart.

At Peabody she initiated a model program for children with deafblindness and additional disabilities and obtained a federal grant to prepare masters level teachers of children with multiple disabilities and deafblindness, a priority for the federal government following the rubella epidemic of 1964-65. Her next *bridge* to the visual impairment field was with Sam Ashcroft, one of the first inductees into the Hall of Fame, and together with Randall Harley they worked with faculty from other universities to reimagine teacher preparation in visual impairment. One of her early publications was in 1971, with Sam Ashcroft, in which they imagined what a revised teacher preparation program in visual impairment would look like. When her multiple disabilities grant ended, she moved to the University of Pittsburgh to create a new program in early childhood special education (another *bridge*). At Pitt, she

worked alongside visual impairment faculty members Ralph Peabody and Mary Moore. Students in the new early childhood program learned about an array of disabilities—far beyond a foundations of special education course—and Drs. Peabody and Moore’s students learned about multiple disabilities and the consultant model for delivering services to children with visual impairment (*bridges* again).

Dr. Hart also built a *bridge* to severe disabilities, which became evident in 1975, when she, Sam Ashcroft, Ed Sontag and others formed the American Association for Education of the Severely and Profoundly Handicapped (AAESPH; now TASH). She helped coordinate the first conference and served as the organization’s first secretary. She wrote about perceptual skills and teams, two of her life-long passions, and she made the case for teachers of students with visual impairment being part of the teams serving these children. Another *bridge* was to orientation and mobility, when she wrote a chapter for the *Foundations of Orientation and Mobility* textbook, which began a long collaboration with Rick Welsh and other personnel who taught orientation and mobility skills.

There were two related *bridges* before retirement: early intervention and family practice. Her early childhood program gradually evolved into early intervention, Birth to 5 years, and family practices associated with this area of study. Her *bridge* to families recognized the need to support families, rather than make the child into someone outside their experience. This is most evident in her testimony to Congress regarding the 1986 amendments to P. L. 94-142. She was not just an educator, she was a parent and a grandparent. Those sensibilities permeated her courses and resulted in professionals who were, first and foremost, respectful, and who celebrated the role of parents in working with their children with disabilities in a family (not school) context. Family-centered practice and the coaching model began with Verna Hart; we just didn’t know what to call it back then. This is most evident in the two position papers (one on parent-educator cooperative efforts and one on programs for visually handicapped infants and young children) written for Geraldine Scholl’s book, *Quality Services for Blind and Visually Handicapped Learners: Statements of Position* (1984), resulting in two more *bridges* to the blindness field and to early intervention.

The thing about these *bridges* is that, in Dr. Hart’s case, they are more like intersections: One leads to another. Multiple disabilities often included visual impairment, and both led to infants. Dr. Hart may not have held a faculty position in visual impairment, but her life’s work never strayed far from the unique needs of children with visual impairment and their families. She participated in AEVH, AAWB, and AERBVI conferences, presented papers, and was elected to national office in AEVH. She served on the *JVIB* editorial advisory board, as well as on the *Teaching Exceptional Children* editorial board.

The *bridges* she built were many. She built them for us and for many others, and we have crossed them all.

**Teacher Preparation.** Before the Education of All Handicapped Children Act passed Congress in 1975, few educators were talking about children with multiple disabilities and/or severe disabilities. Teacher training programs were categorical, and multiple disabilities and deafblindness did not even exist in the law and regulations until 1977. Against this background, Verna Hart was one of the first educators to recognize the complex needs of children with multiple disabilities and to call for a change in teacher preparation away from categories and toward learning needs. As she wrote in her dissertation, “more training is necessary if teachers are to work effectively with the increasing numbers of multiple handicapped children” (Hart, 1967, p. 79). She wrote this before Lowenfeld wrote in 1968

that children with visual/multiple disabilities outnumbered children who only had visual impairment by two-to-one in California.

Verna Hart spent her career trying to address this issue. Starting as the mother of a child with disability, whom she was told to institutionalize, she soon removed him from the institution. Realizing that the teacher shortage in special education could not be met if teachers had to spend multiple years in training, she used her dissertation as the foundation for the rest of her career. She advocated then for “changing completely the present system of teacher preparation by separate category in favor of preparing teachers to teach according to the disorders of learning that exceptional children exhibit” (1967, pp. 79-80). And that’s what she set out to do. Throughout her career, she continued to move special education towards needs rather than categories; the programs she coordinated were programs that fit into state education standards, but she never lost sight of her goal to prepare teachers for the children and students they would find in their practice.

Dr. Hart was also instrumental in developing teacher education for young children with severe and profound disabilities. Her publications include several written with Norris Haring and Ed Sontag, early proponents of children with very complex needs who had been excluded from public education. In the 1970s and early 1980s, most of the information about infants with disabilities was coming out of TASH, the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps, and its journal, *JASH, The Journal of the Association for Persons with Severe Handicaps*. During this same period she was active in the Association for Education of the Visually Handicapped (AEVH) and served as an officer. In 1984 Dr. Hart received the Teacher Educator of the Year award from the Teacher Education Division of the Council for Exceptional Children, for her broad excellence in teacher preparation. In the late 1980s/early 1990s, she was recognized by Division 17 of the Association for Education and Rehabilitation of the Blind and Visually Impaired (AER) with the Josephine L. Taylor Award, which recognized her specific contributions to teacher preparation in visual impairment, deafblindness, and multiple disabilities.

In 2022, many of the teachers she trained have retired, and some people may not recognize her name today. Yet her influence remains. You can see the evidence of her influence in special education legislation, the regulations implementing the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, in the teachers she taught, and in the families who continue to benefit from her philosophy.

**Transdisciplinary Collaboration.** When special education services were still being delivered in a categorical way, Verna Hart was advocating for a team approach. Her research had shown that categorically-prepared teachers were unable to meet the needs of children with disabilities without input and collaboration from other specialists. Her early childhood special education program at the University of Pittsburgh included coursework in transdisciplinary teams before the term was even included in the amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. She modeled transdisciplinary collaboration as well, serving as a consultant to deafblind programs, cerebral palsy centers, specialized schools, centers, and agencies educating children with visual impairment as well as those with severe and profound disabilities. She incorporated this transdisciplinary work into her courses and practica, giving her students preparation in an effective analytical and problem-solving approach.

**Family-Centered.** At the 1986 Hearings on the Amendments to the Education of All Handicapped Children Act, Dr. Hart spoke eloquently of her personal experiences as a parent and grandparent to children with multiple disabilities. Services then were disjointed, and families often struggled not only to find services, but to coordinate them in such a way to normalize everyday family

life. She said then, “There must not be a single model but one that is as individualized for the parents involved as it is for the children” (Hart, 1986, p. 146). While she was not the only professional advocating for a family-centered approach in the law, her personal experience made her words all the more impactful:

A handicapped child affects the whole child—the whole family. . . . Those who have never had to live through it will never know the personal and family toll that a handicapped child can make. Much can be alleviated through family based flexible intervention. Research shows that the children whose parents are given skills to help with their children will make greater gains than those without the parent component. (Hart, 1986, p. 146)

Dr. Hart’s first book, *Beginning with the Handicapped* (1974), was dedicated “To parents who are the child’s first teachers.” Dr. Hart taught her students that going into the home of a child with disabilities was a privilege that should be recognized and respected as such. Our position paper in Scholl’s *Quality Services for Blind and Visually Handicapped Learners: Statements of Position* (Hart & Ferrell, 1984) shows how early she was building this *bridge* to visual impairment. While there were other professionals in early childhood special education who advocated for family-centered practice, it was Dr. Hart who built the *family-centered bridge* to visual impairment. Teacher preparation in visual impairment still concentrates on school-age children, mainly because universities must follow state teacher educator standards. But those of us in early childhood and early intervention know differently because of the work of Verna Hart. We built these principles into our preservice and inservice training and into our professional practice.

**Early Intervention.** Early intervention services for families with children between birth and 3 years of age were not required by law until the 1986 amendments. Within our field, many parents had established their own early intervention services, such as the Foundation for Blind Children in Phoenix, or VIPS in Louisville. Professionals learned their job on the run, from experience, because personnel preparation programs in visual impairment were geared toward school-age children. The Office of Special Education Programs in Washington awarded Dr. Hart the first federally-funded personnel preparation grant to train teachers of infants and toddlers with disabilities in the early 1980s. In 1984, Dr. Hart published an article in *the Journal of Visual Impairment & Blindness* about research as the basis for assessment and programming for infants with visual impairment. In 1986, with the amendments to P. L. 94-142, early intervention services became mandatory. Many of the components of early intervention services were ideas that Dr. Hart had advocated for and recommended in her Congressional testimony and in that first federally-funded infant personnel preparation grant.

One can see how all of her work intersected: multiple disabilities, to teacher preparation, to family-centered practice, to early intervention, all the time building those *bridges* to visual impairment. When we started our doctoral programs, we chose Dr. Hart as our advisor. Little did we know how she would impact the rest of our professional lives. Her ideas—early intervention, family-centered practice, transdisciplinary approaches, and changes in personnel preparation to meet the needs of children who are visually impaired with additional disabilities—are now accepted practice in special education. Her writings and teachings truly helped move the field into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

There were certainly other legends and leaders in the blindness field who contributed to this paradigm shift from categorical teacher preparation to training that reflected the needs of the population of children we serve. But Dr. Hart’s timely research and persistent efforts so soon after the rubella epidemic of 1964-65 were surely some of the earliest. It is no coincidence that Pauline Moor’s

*No time to Lose: A Symposium* (1968), one of the earliest publications to recognize the growing population of children with visual and multiple disabilities, came out of George Peabody College for Teachers, where Verna Hart was on faculty. They undoubtedly supported each other in getting the message out.

For the bridges she built, her work in teacher preparation, transdisciplinary collaboration, family-centered approaches, and early intervention services, we commend her to the Hall of Fame for Leaders and Legends of the Blindness Field. We urge her induction into the Hall of Fame as one of the pioneers in visual/multiple disabilities. She changed our field and our practice.

Sincerely yours,



Kay Alicyn Ferrell, PhD  
Professor *Emerita*, Special Education  
University of Northern Colorado



Christine K. Kennedy, PhD  
Consultant, Retired  
Pennsylvania Early Intervention Technical  
Assistance